General Audiences

No Archive Warnings Apply

Gen

LEGO Ninjago

Cole/Kai/Jay Walker/Zane (only in the background)
Nya/P.I.X.A.L. (also only in the background)
Everyone & Lloyd
Cole & Lloyd Garmadon & Kai & Nya & Jay Walker & Zane

Cole (Ninjago)
Kai (Ninjago)
Jay Walker
Zane (Ninjago)
Nya (Ninjago)
P.I.X.A.L. (Ninjago)
Lloyd Garmadon
Harumi (mentioned)

Non-Sexual Age Play
Age Regression/De-Aging
Hurt/Comfort
Angst
Fluff
Tooth-Rotting Fluff
Platonic Cuddling
Adopted Sibling Relationship
Nightmares
Panic Attacks
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD
Lloyd Garmadon Needs a Hug
Lloyd Garmadon Needs Therapy

English Part 1 of A Little Difference Next Work →

Just Us

outerspaceismyhappyplace

Summary:

Sometimes when Lloyd feels too stressed and overwhelmed, he finds himself wishing he was a little kid again, so much so that he actually feels like he is. He's very careful to keep these indulgences to himself, but after everything that happened with Harumi and with his father, he's been having a harder time controlling his headspace, and he fears he might accidentally let something slip in front of the others.

Notes:

Oddly enough, I actually wrote the sequel to this before I wrote this. I'm still not sure if I will post the sequel, because age-regression fics aren't really a thing in this fandom and I'm not sure how people will react to it? I guess it depends on how this goes.

(See the end of the work for other works inspired by this one (#children) .)

Chapter 1 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/29297793/chapters/71947011)

Lloyd sharply draws in a breath of air when he opens the door to his closet. He's home alone. The door is locked. But there's still a part of him that's paranoid—he's supposed to be the green ninja. The leader of the team. The strongest, most powerful, most put-together out of all of them. And he doesn't exactly feel like he lives up to any of those things when he has a pacifier in his mouth.

He feels ridiculous. He feels embarrassed and ashamed and pathetic but he also feels...safe.

He grabs the bag he keeps all of his Little stuff in and unzips it, sitting down on the floor of his room. There's another moment of hesitation, as there always is before he indulges himself with this. *I shouldn't be doing this,* he thinks. *I'm way too old for this. I'm eighteen.*

But he doesn't feel eighteen. He feels much, much younger than eighteen. He feels so little and scared and vulnerable, and all he really wants is for someone to rock him and sing to him and tell him that everything will be okay, to feel *safe* and *held* and *protected*.

But he can't have that. So this is the next best thing.

The second he pops the pacifier in his mouth he feels himself relax a little bit, releasing the tension from his shoulders. He pulls out his stuffed animals and coloring books and sets them on the floor, and then pulls out the fleece-lined pajamas from the bottom of the bag.

He winces when he takes notice of how sweaty and dirty he feels. A bath would be nice. But he's tried to take baths by himself when little before, and it never turns out very well. He always ends up getting water all over the place, and it tends to be kind of difficult to explain. He'll just have to wait until he can think clearly enough to take a shower by himself.

When he gets like this, it's best to just stay in his room and wait for it to be over until he can function like a normal person again—no trying to pour himself juice, because he'll spill it. No watching cartoons in the living room, because he could fall asleep and forget to turn it off and then get caught. No sneaking into Jay's room even though he has the coolest action figures, because no matter how careful Lloyd is to put them back in the same spots they were, somehow Jay can always tell if someone's touched them.

He has some toys of his own, that he keeps hidden in his closet in the same place as all his other stuff he would never in a million years let anyone see, but Jay's action figure collection is still much more fun to play with than his own.

Right now he doesn't feel like playing anyway, though. He just wants to go to sleep.

Actually, what he really wants is a hug, but even if he *wasn't* home alone, that's not an option.

Maybe if he wasn't regressed, he could handle it, but now he feels so lonely and touch-starved that he would probably start crying the second anyone hugged him, and that would probably prompt some questions that he couldn't answer. He has to be careful.

Yeah, it hurts to see the rest of his team so cuddly and affectionate all the time, especially now that Kai, Zane, Jay, and Cole are all dating and Nya and Pixal are apparently a thing now, too. None of them have been paying very much attention to him lately. But ultimately, it works out in his favor, even if it doesn't feel like it. Everyone else being distracted all of the time means that there's less of a chance they'll notice anything when he slips, which has been happening a *lot* lately.

Lloyd sniffs, pulling his knees up to his chest and resting his forehead on them. It's kind of scary feeling like a four-year-old and being home alone, but the worst part is, this is the only time he feels safe enough to let himself slip all the way. Even then, he's always afraid that he's going to get stuck, somehow, if he goes too deep. If his friends come home earlier than expected and he isn't able to pull himself out of this weird headspace, they'll find out.

And they *can't* find out. Not *ever*.

They probably wouldn't even want him on the team anymore if they found out about...whatever this is. They wouldn't want him. Just like how Harumi didn't want him, and his father didn't want him, and well, it makes sense considering how weak and pathetic he is anyway, but he doesn't think he can handle one more person he loves turning on him even if they have every right to do so.

Lloyd blinks the tears away and climbs into bed, hugging his favorite stuffed animal (a miniature green dragon that was actually modeled to look like his own elemental dragon) against his chest. Maybe he'll feel better in the morning.

Chapter 2 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/29297793/chapters/72013539)

"You don't have to do this! Harumi's using you as a pawn!"

*"*You *are the pawn! A pawn to your own foolishness!"*

The next thing he knows he's being thrown through a wall by the man that only five years ago had tried to stop a thousand-year-old prophecy to prevent them from having to fight each other. What if...what if he's right? What if there really is no good left in him? What if his father really is gone forever?

Lloyd spits out the dust that had gotten in his mouth, struggling to get back up. Everybody's watching*. Their fight is being broadcasted on live television. The entire city just saw him get thrown through a wall.*

What if he can't do it? What if he fails? What if everything gets crushed to oblivion and it's all his fault because he couldn't get back up *to face the fractured shadow of the man he would have done anything to see again only a month ago?*

Tears begin to form in his eyes as he gives it everything he's got but it's not enough *and he's* losing *and...*

"You wouldn't hurt me. I'm your son."

And his father, the very same one who had been his idol and rolemodel his entire life, who had loved and protected him even when he was consumed with evil and who had been there for him when nobody else was, looks him in the eyes and says, "I have no son."

And then Lloyd is thrown through another wall, except this one leads to the outside and he falls *and there's nothing he can do because he* lost *and everything's ruined and everything hurts an-*

Lloyd wakes up in a flurry of panic, shooting straight up in bed and gasping for breath, trembling and hyperventilating, gripping his head in his hands and trying desperately to bring himself back to reality.

"It's...it's not real," he murmurs to himself between choked sobs, "not anymore. I-it's gone, and I'm fine and...and e-everything's...fine." He stifles another sob, trying to keep himself as quiet as possible, even though he can't really tell how loud he's being over the sound of panic going off in his mind, over and over again and...

He feels like he's going to throw up. His heart is racing so fast it feels like he's *there* again. Lloyd squeezes his eyes shut and covers his ears.

"Not real, not real, not real," he repeats to himself. The nightmare is over and he *knows* he's safe in his room, and his father is in the most secure prison that exists, and everything's *fine*, but *he's not*.

It's not like none of them have ever had panic attacks before. In their line of work, they're sort of a common occurrence. Jay in particular struggles with them the most because of his already-existing anxiety disorder. No one ever seems annoyed when they have to calm him down from them, even if they happen in the middle of the night. Maybe it would be okay if...

No. No, he's not going to wake his friends up in the middle of the night because he had a bad dream. That's ridiculous. He's *eighteen*.

He's...*supposed* to be, anyway. No, why does this keep happening?

It used to be just an every-once-in-a-while thing, when he was too stressed out and just needed to relax. Now it's happening practically every other day, and he *doesn't know why* and it's *scaring* him. Is there something wrong with him? Maybe he's brain damaged from being thrown through so many walls.

Lloyd sticks the pacifier that had fallen out back in his mouth and buries his face in his stuffed dragon, squeezing it as tight as he can as he tries to regulate his breathing. How was he supposed to do that again? Breathe in, count to four, breathe out. His pathetic trembling is making it much more difficult than it should be. First Spinjitzu Master, he can't even *breathe* right.

He wants more than anything to be allowed to go wake someone up so that at least he doesn't have to be all alone. Jay, Zane, Cole, and Kai usually all sleep in the same room now, and Nya and Pixal share a bed, too. But Lloyd doesn't have *anyone*. He feels so *lonely* and *scared* and *little*. He doesn't want to be alone. But he has to be, because if anyone else found out about this thing that keeps happening to him, he would be alone for real. He just has to pretend like everything's fine, if he wants to keep his friends.

Sometimes it's really hard, too. In the past he'd been able to pass off acting childish as just acting how he would if he hadn't been aged up, but now he's technically existed for about fourteen years, so he can't use that excuse anymore. If he slips in front of everyone, he has to constantly be paying attention to what he's doing, to make sure he doesn't absent-mindedly put his thumb in his mouth or spill his drink at dinner because he's so uncoordinated when he gets like this, or talk using any words that sound too childish (once he'd accidentally said that his belly hurt when he was sick, but that he was able to blame on his fever).

It's exhausting sometimes, pretending to be an adult when he really feels like he's about four. The worst is when he gets even *younger* than four, although thankfully that's only happened a few times and he hadn't been around anyone when it happened.

Lloyd stares into the darkness of his room with dried tear tracks down his cheeks and thinks for a moment before taking the pacifier out of his mouth. Maybe if he just...maybe if he just tries hard enough to not give in to whatever this is, it'll go away. Maybe he just needs to ignore it.

Yeah. That'll work. It'll be fine.

Chapter 3 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/29297793/chapters/72407955)

This shouldn't be so hard.

"You okay, Lloyd?" Kai asks cautiously. "This is like, the third time in a row you've lost."

"I'm fine!" Lloyd says. He pulls himself to his feet again, stubbornly ignoring the pain shooting through his wrist. He's pretty sure he twisted it, but he's fought through much worse injuries than a twisted wrist, so he opts to pretend that nothing happened. Except, of course, being totally annihilated by Kai during sparring three times in a row.

Everything feels fuzzy. His mind hasn't been clear for days. He's been anxious and on edge ever since he'd thrown away his pacifier and coloring books. He had told himself that he didn't need them. That he was capable of being a normal

person and coping with stress in other, *non* utterly humiliating ways. And he'd *tried*, but nothing ever seemed like it was enough to combat the relentless anxiety and nightmares and panic attacks.

"I'm, uh...gonna head back inside. I'm kinda tired," Lloyd says.

"Oh. Okay." Kai frowns. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes! I'm fine. I just didn't get a lot of sleep last night."

That definitely wasn't a lie—actually, it was probably a big part of the reason he's so off today. But he immediately regrets telling the truth when Kai asks, "why not?"

"I...I don't know. I just couldn't fall asleep. That happens to everybody."

"Yeah, but usually for me it means Jay's kicking me in his sleep or I'm stressed about something. And you don't have to sleep in the same bed with Jay, so I'm assuming it's the other thing." Kai's gaze softens. "You know you can talk to us about anything, right?"

Lloyd wants to believe him. *So* badly, he wants to believe him. He wants to tell them all everything, from the flashbacks to the nightmares to the panic attacks to the whole feeling like he's a toddler thing that he doesn't understand, and he wants them to still love him even though he's messed up, but there's no way they would still like him if they knew what a *basket case* he is, so Lloyd forces himself to smile and say, "I know. Really, there's nothing wrong. I'm just...*really* tired."

"You've been saying that a *lot* lately," Kai points out. "Are you sure everything's-"

"Yes! Everything's fine! You need to stop worrying about me!"

"I'm always gonna worry about you, Lloyd," Kai says. "You're my little brother."

Lloyd feels himself losing his grip on his headspace and his emotions as a lump begins to form in his throat. He wants to be his little brother. That's *all* he wants. Hearing Kai say that makes it a lot harder for him to roll his eyes and respond, "whatever. See you later."

And then he walks away, and goes back to his own room and curls up as small as he can make himself on his bed. After a few minutes, he sticks his thumb in his mouth.

It's *stupid* and he *hates* it and it's *humiliating,* but it makes him feel better and right now Lloyd just *really* wants to feel better. Everything feels so complicated and heavy and he just wants to be *little* again, and-

Well, no, actually, that's not exactly true. When he was little, the vast majority of his time was spent at a boarding school in which everybody was mean to him and everything felt horrible and he hated himself because he was never evil enough for them, even though that was the only thing he wanted.

And then, when he finally went to go live with Wu and the ninja, he got a few months of *some* kind of normalcy before he was aged up by the tomorrow's tea. So really, he had never actually gotten to be a kid at all.

That thought makes everything worse, and tears sting Lloyd's eyes as a deep sense of longing makes itself known in his chest. It isn't *fair*. He should have been able to have a normal childhood, but he'd been cheated out of it because of some stupid prophecy, and now he'll really never get to know what it feels like to be little and not have to worry about anything, because Lloyd has to take care of *himself*, and he always has. There's never been anyone else to take care of him. It's always only ever been *him*.

Lloyd blinks the tears out of his eyes. Maybe *that's* where this weird thing is coming from. Maybe he just needs to be a kid.

It's too bad that's not an option.

He reluctantly takes his thumb out of his mouth and instead wraps his arms around himself. He can't be a kid, no matter how much he wishes he could be. He has to be the green ninja. That's who he is. There was never a choice in that.

He doesn't get a choice.

Chapter 4 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/29297793/chapters/72460896)

"Where are you going? It's Friday, remember? We usually all watch a movie together."

Lloyd blinks. It seems kind of stupid that they still do that. It was fun when they were younger, but they're not kids anymore. Everything feels so much darker and more serious now. Watching a movie every week for fun sounds so *stupid* taking into consideration everything that's happened. It's not important. It's just a waste of time.

Lloyd tells that to himself as he turns around and replies, "oh. Well, I'm just feeling kind of tired today, so I think I'm gonna g-"

"You can stay up for a few more hours," Cole interrupts. "You've been spending *way* too much time cooped up in your room lately, and we haven't all hung out together in *forever*."

"I...but I..." Lloyd bites his lip.

The less time he spends around his friends the better. He constantly feels seconds away from a breakdown now: he's extremely sleep deprived from being kept up by nightmares every night for the past two weeks, he hasn't really been able to stomach much food since he feels so anxious all the time, he's always jittery and on edge, and merely brushing hands with somebody is enough to make him emotional because of how ridiculously touch-starved he is.

"Come on, man!" Jay says. "We miss you! You can pick the movie too, if you want. We can't decide. Kai wants Friday the 13th, Zane wants WALL-E, and I want Star Wars."

Would it be suspicious if he refused? Would they think anything was wrong if he says no and goes back to his room yet again? The looks on his teammates' faces say yes. He can't solve *everything* by running away from it, right? He needs to hang out with his friends. To avoid being suspicious. Not because he misses them, or because he'll feel safer if all of them are in the same room as him—it's *only* to make sure they don't get suspicious.

Lloyd swallows. He definitely can't watch Friday the 13th. Normally it wouldn't be a problem, but he feels like he could slip any minute and it probably wouldn't be a good idea to watch a horror movie when he feels like he's four years old. WALL-E proposes the opposite problem—cartoons always make him feel younger, and it might coax him into his weird headspace without his permission. "Um. Which Star Wars?" he asks.

"The Empire Strikes Back," Jay replies. "Obviously. It's the best one."

"O-okay. I guess we can watch that."

Nobody complains, even though they've all seen the Empire Strikes Back more times than they can count because Jay picks it so often. Lloyd feels a strange wave of guilt. They don't even care about the movie. They just want to spend time with him. He hadn't even really realized how much time he's been spending alone. He just always feels like he's about to slip, even more so now that he won't let himself slip when he's alone. He thought it would help, that it would go away if he ignored it long enough, but so far it's only made everything worse.

Shakily, he sits down on the couch next to Nya and Pixal. He can handle this for two hours. He's just watching a movie, after all. He doesn't even have to *do* anything. It'll be fine.

And it *is*, actually, for most of the movie. He sits on his hands so that he won't accidentally put his thumb in his mouth, and listening to Jay's constant chattering and Kai and Cole telling him to shut up, Lloyd almost forgets why he was nervous about anything. He can do this. He can be a normal person and hang out with his friends. There was nothing to worry about.

It isn't until the end, when Luke goes to Cloud City to fight Darth Vader, when Lloyd realizes with a sinking feeling in his stomach, that maybe he *won't* be able to handle this movie.

"Did you know that George Lucas told the actors that the real line was gonna be 'Obi Wan killed your father?'" Jay says. "Only Mark Hamill knew, and the rest of the cast was all surprised at the screening. And then wh-"

"Jay! We know, you've told us that already," Kai interrupts, rolling his eyes. "Will you just shut up and let us watch the movie?"

Jay pouts, and onscreen Darth Vader cuts Luke's hand off. Lloyd jumps. "Are you okay?" Nya asks softly.

Lloyd closes his eyes. He *should* be okay. He knows what's going to happen. He's seen this movie a million times before, *why* does he feel so...

"Turn it off," he whispers.

"What?" Zane says.

"*Turn it off*!"

The tv goes off, and Kai flicks the lights back on. "What's wrong?"

Lloyd swallows, his hands wringing the fabric at the hem of his gi. "I...I don't..."

This is ridiculous. He's being *ridiculous*. It's just a *movie*. A movie that he's seen before so many times before his father had been resurrected. It had never bothered him before. There are *tons* of movies that have plots about sons fighting their evil fathers. He should be fine. He should be *fine*.

"Lloyd," Zane says gently, kneeling down in front of him. "What's going on?"

"I..." No, he can't cry *now*! Lloyd squeezes his eyes shut, but somehow the tears still slip through, wetting his eyelashes and rolling down his cheeks as he listens to the sounds of things that had happened to him *months* ago, things that shouldn't be affecting him anymore because they're *gone*, and everything should be *fine*, and he... "I'm sorry," Lloyd chokes, covering his face with his hands. "I d-don't know why I...this shouldn't b-be...I, I'm being *stupid*, I just...it reminded me...re-reminded me of, of..."

Zane seems to understand what's going on, somehow. "Did it...did it remind you of your fight with your father?"

All Lloyd can do is nod meekly, desperately trying to wipe the tears away but they just *keep coming*. "I'm sorry," he sobs. "I'm sorry, it's stupid, I don't kn-know why I...it's just a *movie*! I sh-shouldn't be s-so..." Everyone's *looking* at him, and he *hates* it and they're probably all thinking about how pathetic and weak he is, getting this worked up over a stupid *movie* that they'd all seen a hundred times before.

"You don't have anything to be sorry about," Nya promises him gently. "Are you okay with being touched right now?"

Lloyd nods before he can stop himself, and when Nya wraps her arms around him he buries his face in the crook of her neck and clings onto her. He shouldn't be allowed to do this. He's not their little brother anymore. He's the leader of the team. He's the one who should be there for *them*. He shouldn't be... "This is so *stupid*," he spits. "I'm sorry. I d-don't know why it-"

"It's not stupid," Jay interjects. "I get it. Lots of weird things trigger me sometimes, and they don't always even make sense. Like, one time, I was just having a really bad day, and then my favorite pen broke, and then I cried about it for an hour. It made absolutely no sense, and I thought it was the dumbest thing anyone had ever cried about and that everyone would make fun of me, but I told Zane what was wrong and he just took me to the store to get a new pen."

"Yes, I remember that," Zane chuckles, pecking a quick kiss on his boyfriend's cheek before turning back to Lloyd with a more serious expression. "I know it may seem like it's completely random, but really it makes perfect sense. You had a traumatic experience, and then something reminded you of that experience. This is a perfectly normal response to trauma, Lloyd. I know it isn't very fun, but there's nothing wrong with you."

Lloyd doesn't answer right away. They don't know about the other piece. If they did, surely they would change their minds about all that. They would never follow anyone who needs to act like a baby to feel better. He's disgusting, and he's ridiculous, and he's weak, and he's pathetic...he can't be here. He's going to slip. He needs to get away from them. Slowly, he pulls away from Nya. "Oh. Um, thank you," he mumbles. "I feel better now. I just wanna go to bed."

"Are you sure?" Zane asks, frowning.

"Yeah," Lloyd says. "I'm fine. This doesn't happen very often, guys, it just-"

"So this has happened before?"

Lloyd freezes. "W-well...yeah, but like...it's not *bad* or anything. I'm...'m fine. It almost never happens."

Zane pauses. "Next time, will you come get us when it happens? It's not good to go through this kind of thing alone, Lloyd, and you *have* a support system. We will *always* be here for you."

By some miracle, Lloyd manages to spit out some kind of acknowledgement and false agreement before he locks himself back in his room again and shoves his face into his pillow. He's *not* going to cry. He is *not*. Crying is for babies, and he is *not* a baby, no matter how much he wishes he were.

When Cole knocks on the door to check and see if he's okay, Lloyd stays perfectly silent and perfectly still, hoping that it'll seem like he's fallen asleep. It works, but when he hears Cole leave, there is some part of him that wishes he had stayed.

He hates himself for thinking that, though. Cole left, which means he thinks Lloyd is okay, which should be a good thing because *nobody* is allowed to know how not-okay Lloyd Garmadon really is. Not ever. He needs to be okay. *They* need him to be okay.

Lloyd curls in on himself, wrapping his arms around his midsection. Everything is fine.

Now if he can just keep this up for the rest of his life, everything will *stay* fine.

Chapter 5 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/29297793/chapters/72667905)

Okay, this is getting ridiculous.

Lloyd shuts the closet door behind him and curls up in the little nest of blankets he'd made for himself, tears slipping down his cheeks as he rips open the package of pacifiers he'd bought a few days ago.

He hadn't been planning on it—he had been at the store to get groceries. He had actually very intentionally stayed clear of the toy aisles, knowing that he wouldn't have been able to help himself there, but had completely forgotten to avoid the baby aisle. God, he *hated* himself when he threw the package in the cart. He should have thrown them away, but instead he'd stuffed them in the half-empty bag in his closet and tried to forget about them.

But after the nightmare he's just had, he just really, *really* needs some kind of comfort.

Somehow, he feels worse now that he's actually gotten permission to wake his friends up in the middle of the night, because it's taking even more self-restraint now than it was before. *They said it was okay,* a little voice in the back of his head pleads. *Please, just go ask for help.*

But he can't. He can't let himself.

The pacifiers he'd gotten are a little small for his mouth since they were made for *real* babies, but they'll have to do. Lloyd curls in on himself, hugging his knees against his chest and burying his face in his blanket that he'd dragged from his bed into his closet. He can't do this forever. He doesn't even know if he can do this for one more *day*. He's so tired and sad and scared and lonely but he's not allowed to *do* anything about it and it's *not fair*.

When other people get stressed out, they meditate or go for walks or talk to people about it or do other, *normal* things people are supposed to do when they're stressed out.

When Lloyd gets stressed out, he feels like a toddler.

He's slipped *really* hard this time. He doesn't think he's going to be able to pull himself out of this weird headspace on command. All he can do now is wait for it to be over. Hopefully he'll snap out of it by the time everyone else wakes up.

His hiccupping sobs eventually slow down, and his eyelids begin to feel heavy. He's *exhausted*. He's barely slept the past few weeks, having been plagued by relentless nightmares about his father and Harumi—Morro sometimes makes an appearance, too, but the worst ones are the ones that his friends are in.

"You're so pathetic," they spit. *"I can't believe we've let you be our leader for so long. You don't belong on the team. You don't belong with us. You don't belong anywhere."*

Lloyd can't differentiate anymore between rational fears and paranoia. *Everything* is a threat. He can't trust *anyone*, no matter how much he thinks they love him.

His father had loved him, more than anything, and he had been wrong about that. He had thought—foolishly—that Harumi loved him. He was so stupid to think that. He should have realized she was lying the second she started showing interest in him. Nobody could love him, after all.

Lloyd wasn't intending on falling asleep, but he hadn't gotten a full night's sleep in nearly two weeks, so in the end he didn't end up having much say in the matter.

By some kind of miracle, he doesn't have any nightmares within the next four hours. He wakes up still curled up in his blanket nest in his closet, a ray of sunlight peering through the crack in the door and playing across his face.

Lloyd still has his pacifier in his mouth and his favorite blanket nuzzled up against his face (and, embarrassingly, a string of drool down his chin). Somewhere near well-rested, which is a foreign sensation at this point, all tiny and cozy in his little nest he'd made for himself while sucking happily on his pacifier, and having not woken up from a nightmare, he feels, for a few moments, happy.

But then he pauses and immediately spits his pacifier out. *No*. No, why is he *still small*? He's still little. He's not *supposed* to be still little. He's *supposed* to be big now.

Lloyd sits up, wiping the spit off his chin with his sleeve. He *knew* he shouldn't have gotten those pacifiers. That's probably why, right? It's his own fault for not having enough self-control. Tears start stinging in the corners of his eyes. Lloyd's so tired of crying. He's been doing a ridiculous amount of that lately. He swallows. This is...fine. He can deal with it, he just needs to avoid everyone until it goes aw-

"Hey, Lloyd? Wake up, Zane made pancakes for everyone."

At the sound of Kai's voice from outside his room, Lloyd freezes. "Uh...y-yeah, okay, I'll be right there!"

No, what is he going to *do*? He can't eat breakfast with everyone when he's like this! Lloyd shakily stands up and opens the closet door. Maybe he can lie and say he's sick? It wouldn't be a complete lie; his stomach is aching just thinking about going out there. That would give him an excuse to stay in bed all day, but it doesn't seem like a good idea. Zane would probably ask too many questions and give him a check-up, which would be even worse than eating breakfast with everyone.

Nope. Lloyd just has to force himself to act like a normal person.

He gets dressed, halfway hoping putting his gi on will make him feel bigger, but he doesn't feel any different. Still as pathetic and babyish as he was when he woke up. Closing his eyes in concentration, Lloyd tries his hardest to claw his way out of his headspace, but it's useless. He just has to pretend. Okay. He can do this.

"Morning, sleeping beauty," Kai teases, tousling his hair after he walks into the kitchen. "You slept in really late today."

Lloyd shrugs. His plate has already been set at his usual spot at the table, which isn't unusual; Zane does that for everyone.

What is unusual, though, is that the second the thought pops in his head that he's not sure he's going to be able to cut up his own pancakes because he feels so uncoordinated, he looks down at his plate and is taken aback.

"Uh...Zane?" Lloyd says. "Why did you cut up my pancakes for me?"

The nindroid turns back around. "Oh," he says. "I don't know. I wasn't thinking."

Lloyd studies him for a second, unsure of what to make of this situation. It's a little strange, but it's a huge relief he doesn't have to worry about doing it himself, so he doesn't think anything of it. Until Jay speaks.

"Can you cut up *my* pancakes?" He asks.

"You can cut up your own pancakes, Jay," Kai says.

"But so can Lloyd!"

Lloyd looks, confused, at everyone's reactions to that statement. They all look...angry? At Jay? For asking for his pancakes to be cut up? Sure, it's sort of a childish request, but why would it warrant the dirty looks everyone's giving him? Jay seems rather upset, and Lloyd doesn't like it when his friends are upset, so he pipes up, "why won't you cut up Jay's pancakes?"

Everyone looks at him, and Zane sighs. "Okay, love. Give me your plate."

Jay's face lights up, and Zane cuts up his pancakes, and the vibes in the room go back to normal.

That was...weird.

Chapter 6 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/29297793/chapters/73280769)

Notes:

Warning: There are some suicidal thoughts depicted in this chapter. It's only a few lines and nobody gets hurt, but I thought I'd better put a warning anyway because I don't want to upset anyone or catch anyone off guard.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes (#chapter_6_endnotes) .)

This was a *terrible* idea.

Lloyd can barely handle *hanging out with his friends*, how could he have *possibly* thought he could handle a mission?

He takes a deep breath, trying to calm the fluttering anxiety settling in his chest as he paces back and forth.

He doesn't even have a hard job. He's just supposed to be lookout. He should be able to do that! All he has to do is watch from the other side of the street on top of the building and alert his friends over the radio if something looks suspicious or anything...

The problem is, he doesn't *want* to watch. What if something goes wrong?

Well, that's stupid, because that's the reason he's *supposed* to watch. In case something *does* go wrong. But...

Lloyd wraps his arms around himself. He can't. He can't do this. He feels like he's at the verge of a panic attack. He doesn't want to be here again, and he doesn't want to be important, and he doesn't want to have to watch...he just wants to go *home*. He wants to pick up his radio and ask for somebody else to take over for him, and then maybe somebody else can take him home so he doesn't have to be all alone and...

No. He can't do that. Lloyd breathes shakily, squeezing his eyes shut. He needs to keep it together. He's fine. It'll be fine.

He had actually been *asked* if he thought he'd be okay on a mission, and he said yes, so he can't go back on that now. Lloyd takes his mask off, hoping it'll help him breathe easier as he paces back and forth on the rooftop.

His hands are shaking. His heart is pounding. Why is this *happening* to him? Is he going crazy? What if he is, and he never gets better and he gets kicked off the team because he's so useless?

They're the same thoughts that have been running through his head over and over again for the past month, but they're still every bit as terrifying as the first time they occurred to him. He can't hide this forever. Sooner or later they're going to find out. Not only about the panic attacks, but about the...other thing.

Lloyd's breath hitches. He's slipping again.

That's not surprising. He's always slipping these days. He can't seem to get a grip on his headspace anymore.

It didn't used to be a problem. He had actually started regressing a long time ago. He did it subconsciously after he was aged up, although that wasn't too bad because he only regressed to about nine because that's the age he was used to being. That had gone away after a while, after he got more accustomed to his new age and everything.

He'd started doing it again after the Preeminent was defeated, because being possessed and being forced to hurt his friends caused a lasting impact on him. He would have nightmares about Morro's possession practically every night, too. Being small helped, a lot. More than any other coping skills he'd been told about.

He'd do it from time to time whenever he was feeling too stressed out, but it was almost always intentional.

It was only after everything that had happened with Harumi and his father that he'd started losing control.

...He can't control *anything* anymore. Everything is falling apart, and everything hurts and everything is horrible and there's *nothing he can do*.

Lloyd chokes back a sob, covering his hands with his mouth as his eyes close and he starts crying for the millionth time in the past few months.

For a split second he looks at the edge of the building he's standing on top of and wonders how many problems he'd solve if he just...happened to fall off of it.

The adult part of him wants to do it. The adult part of him takes a step towards the edge.

The adult part of him doesn't want to admit that if his little side hadn't taken over at that exact moment, he might have actually done it.

He's scared.

He's scared of his dad, he's scared of Harumi, he's scared of his own friends, and now he's even scared of himself. Nothing feels safe.

Lloyd climbs down the ladder and darts into the nearby alleyway, curling himself up into a little ball in the dark corner and clamping his hands over his mouth to muffle the sobs.

He's so focused on trying to not make any noise it barely registers when Kai's voice comes from his radio. *"Lloyd, are you okay?"* he says. *"Where are you?"*

He doesn't answer. Instead, he rips the device off of his belt and chucks it at the wall across from him, watching as it shatters into a million tiny pieces. He's never talking to anyone again. He's never going home again. He's just going to stay here for the rest of his life and never ever ever see his friends again. Yup. That seems like a pretty good plan to him.

Lloyd doesn't know how long he stays there for. It could have been minutes, or it could have been hours—it was impossible to tell. But nevertheless, he doesn't stay alone in the alleyway forever.

He lets out a soft gasp when he hears footsteps and somebody approaching him. What if it's someone bad? What if it's his father? That doesn't make any sense, because his father is locked up in the most secure prison cell that's ever been designed, but in his panicked state all logic has simply gone out the window. He doesn't look up to see who it is, instead burying his face in his arms, trying to keep himself quiet as panic rings through his mind at an impossible speed.

"Lloyd?"

It's Kai. Lloyd looks up, bleary-eyed, at his big brother. "I...I'm...I'm sorry, I..." he sputters.

His speech is slipping. The lisp he adapts when he gets like this is becoming apparent, as is the stutter. Usually if he focuses hard enough he can get his voice to sound normal, but he's far too upset and the unintentional baby-talk is only making his panicking worse. "I...I c-can't...I'm sorry, please don't..."

"Okay, shh. You're okay. You don't have to explain yourself, we can just stay here until you've calmed down, okay?"

Lloyd shakily nods his head, and the feeling of Kai's arms around him is so relieving he starts crying harder. The part of his brain that's still thinking logically says that he needs to get it together. He needs to shut up and finish the mission and quit being such a pathetic baby. But that side is *exhausted* from fighting the other one for so long, and it is at this moment when Lloyd finally loses the battle and climbs onto Kai's lap, burrowing his face in the crook of his neck.

Kai is offering comfort and he is in *so* much need of comfort, comfort that he'd denied himself for what feels like forever, so he's going to take it. "P-please don't...don't leave," he chokes.

"Hey, I'm not going anywhere," Kai assures him softly, rubbing his back.

"You...*are*. You...you're gonna *hate* me."

"What are you talking about? I could never hate you!"

Lloyd tightens his grip on Kai, squeezing his eyes shut. "'M s'possed to be better," he murmurs.

"What? Lloyd, you didn't do anything wrong. You had a panic attack. Nobody is mad at you."

"'S not just that. 'M all...messed up, an', an' you're not gonna...you're not gonna like me anymore, 'cause I'm..."

"Hold on. Is this about the age regression thing? We already know about that, buddy."

Lloyd freezes. "You...you *what*?" He pries himself away from Kai and scrambles to the other side of the alleyway, staring back at him with wide eyes.

"Yeah...you'd been acting really strange lately and we couldn't figure out why, but Zane put two and two together after he noticed there was a charge for pacifiers on the receipt when you got groceries a few days ago."

Lloyd covers his mouth with his hands, mortified. How could he have been so stupid? That hadn't even *occurred* to him. He thought he had been *so* careful, concealing every little piece of evidence that might give something away... "Wh-why am I still here?" he whispers.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean...th-the team. Why haven't you kicked me out?"

"What? Why would we..." Kai trails off. *"Oh*," he says. "Oh my god, you thought...no! No, we would never do anything like that! We were gonna wait until you were ready to talk to us about it to bring it up, but maybe we should have...my god, Lloyd. Come here."

Cautiously, Lloyd climbs back into Kai's lap.

"You're our little brother," Kai says softly, running his hand through Lloyd's hair. "And if you need that to mean something more literal, that's totally okay. This is just your way of coping and it doesn't mean you're broken or messed up or weak or anything. We would never, ever think any less of you for it, okay?"

"Wait, but..." Lloyd mumbles, pulling away from Kai for a moment. "Is this...is it a real thing? Th-that happens to real people? It's not jus' me being..." he gestures vaguely.

"Yeah, it's a real thing," Kai says, frowning. "You didn't know that?"

Lloyd shakes his head. "No. I didn't know what w-was happening to me. I thought I was...just going crazy or something."

"Oh," Kai breathes, pulling him back against his chest. "That must have been scary for you, huh? I didn't really know what it was either before Zane explained it to me. He can explain it better when we go back home, but he said it happens to a lot of people with extensive childhood trauma, as a way of coping with all of that. It's supposed to give them a chance to have like, a second childhood or something. I think it makes a lot of sense for you, because you literally *did* miss out on half your childhood. But yeah, it's a real thing. It's called age regression."

Lloyd swallows. His heart is beating faster again, but this time it's not out of fear. It has a *name*. The thing that's been happening to him for so long finally has a *name*. It's a real thing, and he's *not* crazy. He buries his face in Kai's shoulder. "So...I can...I can do this in front of you? I can be little and...can you...would it be okay if you...if you played with me sometimes? I...I mean you don't have to, but when I play by myself I have to be *all* the different people, and it gets kinda boring."

"Sure, buddy, I'd love to," Kai says. "I'm sure everyone else would too."

Lloyd can barely believe what he's hearing. "But...won't you not want me to be the leader anymore? If you have to take care of me an' stuff?"

"I already told you that we won't think *any* less of you for this, okay? It's just something you need to do every once in a while to feel better. You can be the fearless green ninja *and* our adorable little brother. Just...not at the same time, okay? We don't want you getting hurt. If you feel like you're slipping during a mission, you have to let one of us know."

"Okay. I will," Lloyd says, and this time he means it. For the first time in what feels like centuries, he actually feels *safe*.

"You ready to go home? We can watch a movie or play a game or do whatever you want."

Lloyd ruminates on this for a second. "I think I just wanna cuddle," he says.

"We can do that too," Kai smiles.

"And...are you sure it's okay? Everyone else will be okay with it too?"

"Of course they will. We all love you, Lloyd, remember? You don't have to be embarrassed about it. It's just us."

…He's right, isn't he? It *is* just them. Suddenly Lloyd feels awfully silly for hiding this for so long. These aren't some strangers that he knows nothing about. These are his best friends, his *family*, and they would never, *ever* betray him. Maybe everything seems out of control and scary and unpredictable these days, but one thing that Lloyd knows is never going to change is his big brothers and sisters.

Lloyd nods. "Okay," he says, wiping his tears away. "Let's go home."

Notes:

Remember at the beginning when I said I'd already written a sequel? That was only a one-shot, but I've decided to make it into another multi-chapter fic, with the initial one-shot being the last chapter. It'll probably be a while before I get the first chapter out, but here's the synopsis:

Lloyd's age regression is part of the team's dynamic now. Now that he's learning better coping skills and getting more therapy and support for past trauma, everything seems to be going much better for everyone. Well...mostly everyone. Jay, for some reason, doesn't seem to be too thrilled about this new arrangement, and no one can quite figure out why.

Series this work belongs to:

- Part 1 of A Little Difference (http://archiveofourown.org/series/2190534) Next Work → (http://archiveofourown.org/works/30107922)

Works inspired by this one:

- some ice cream on a hot day (https://archiveofourown.org/works/42486276) by Anonymous

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